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NEWS-LETTER

THE MORAL ASPECT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

RELIGION AND POLITICAL PARTIES

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LIFE AS DIALOGUE
BY
J. H. OLDHAM

WHILE THIS NEWS-LETTER is being prepared for the press a debate is taking place in the House of Commons on the Government's economic survey. Anybody who frequents the galleries of the House of Commons knows the significance of the silence which occasionally falls on that normally restless assembly when a statement of unusual gravity is made. Such a hearing was accorded to Sir Stafford Cripps's two-hour speech, opening the debate.

THE MORAL ASPECT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Slowly the outer coverings are being stripped away. When the economic crisis was spoken of solely in terms of economic planning or the lack of it, nobody but those whose business it is to understand these matters was profoundly moved. But now it is clear that, important as economic planning may be as the framework of the life of the nation, the real crisis is in the hearts and lives of British citizens. We had thought perhaps too easily that our economic future depended only upon large plans, and now suddenly the number of times a week that a man and his wife pop into the tobacconist's, their preferences in films, the degree of order and punctuality in their homes which sends them off on time or late for work, and the time spent by a girl in front of the mirror in the cloakroom of office or factory, all have some-

thing to do with pulling out of, or getting deeper into, economic crisis. What we have missed in the last two years has been a voice from the microphone, making the ordinary person feel his importance in the life of the nation. Miss Violet Markham made an appeal in a letter to *The Times* on March 11th when she said, " Ministers and persons in high places do not feel the brunt of a fuel shortage. Very properly, they do not stand in queues with perambulators to get a handful of coal. But they should not overlook the psychology of those who do."

The moral and personal aspect of the crisis was stressed in the review of the White Paper in *The Times Literary Supplement* (March 8th, 1947).[1] After pointing out that the White Paper offers no five-year plan the writer continues : " It remains to be seen whether the Briton, with the help of his pride in his nation, the assistance of his religion and the inspiration of his poets, will of his own free will work as productively and live as sparely as others have done under an official taskmaster. Austerity is certain to be our portion for a long while to come. Let it be the austerity of a lean, athletic people passionately reforging a great destiny."

The writer appeals to the Churches to fling themselves wholeheartedly into the common effort for " the recovery of England from religious negligence and civic passivity, from the ignominy of selfishness and cowardice ". But some caution is needed here. Against the rousing appeal of *The Times Literary Supplement* must be set the words of the Editor of the *Economist* who while admitting that moral appeals sometimes work wonders adds that economic crises are difficult to dramatize and that the public has acquired a high degree of immunity to patriotic exhortation. Appeals to moral effort can only be made effective when they correspond to moral realities. Those who preach and teach in the Churches have to ask whether and if so in what degree, moral issues are involved in the prospect of a sharp fall in the nation's standard of living before they lend moral support to a crusade to avert it.

[1] To be republished by *The Times* as a pamphlet.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY BY A POLITICAL PARTY

When politicians in this country, whose actions are more open to inspection than those of most others, openly declare on behalf of their parties a respect for Christianity we may take it as an honest declaration of purpose. Thus when Mr. Churchill, in the last Conservative conference at Blackpool, set first among the " main objectives " of his party—" To uphold the Christian religion and resist all attacks upon it "—he was not denying that any other party had a right to make the same claim or suggesting that his own had a monopoly in Christian principle.

A rather more challenging argument was developed by Mr. Quintin Hogg, M.P., in a letter which appeared in *The Times* on January 25 and opened an interesting correspondence. He said :

> Out of the very core of resistance to Fascism in almost every country, victorious or defeated, has emerged a new party, vigorous, democratic, and in a true sense progressive, which under whatever name supports the ideals of Christian democracy, and finds itself in opposition both to Communists and Socialists. Under the mask of the traditional party system that is the true position here. For the true role of Conservatism—which its whole history and ethos proclaim that it must now play—is to appear as the champion of Christian democracy in Britain.

A claim of this sort, which is much more thoroughgoing than Mr. Churchill's, needs careful investigation. At first glance many discouraged Christians may welcome this support by a powerful political party for their beliefs, when the tide seems flowing so strongly against them, but they have to ask themselves whether a politician is not tempted to think more of votes than of beliefs. The M.R.P. had a great success in France ; the Conservative party has had an equally great setback in Britain and Mr. Hogg may be turning to France for recipes.

The choice for Christians was not made easy. Certainly on January 30 Mr. Hogg was supported by Mr. Douglas Dodds-Parker, M.P., but on the same day Mr. Mervyn Stockwood, as "a parish priest who has worked for many years in a poor district of a large city", questioned Mr. Hogg's thesis. Churchmen, he said, must ask themselves "which of the existing parties is the most likely to further the implications of the Gospel".

> I am satisfied that the opportunities are more favourable under the present regime than under the regime which Mr. Hogg supported. No political arrangement can compel a bad citizen to become good, but it can increase or diminish the chances of conversion. . . . . It is conceivable that the Church's most urgent task, so far as this country is concerned, is not to help in the restoration of Conservatism, but to provide the spiritual vision and drive for the new experiment.

Each started from Christian principles, but Mr. Stockwood's "Vote Labour" ended in flat contradiction to Mr. Hogg's "Vote Conservative."

What enemy in Britain should Christians band themselves against? The Communist party?—but that would be ridiculous, at least as yet. Against the party of Sir Stafford Cripps, the author of *Towards Christian Democracy*,[1] and against the party which through Trade Unions and Co-operatives has roots in English, and still more in Welsh, working-class Non-conformity? But this would seem unnecessary.

Fortunately in this country we have so far been spared the deep intellectual and religious cleavages which weaken some continental nations. Mr. R. E. Simms in the same correspondence on February 3 has some point in saying:

> The great cleavage in Europe is between those who seek salvation in a materialist philosophy of history and those who, whatever their social and political creed, believe in a spiritual basis for life.

[1] Allen & Unwin. 5s.

Mr. Simms prophesies almost gleefully that "the same cleavage will certainly arise in this country with strange effects upon existing political loyalties". Yet nothing could more greatly add to our unhappiness than if such a cleavage did arise here. There is an odium attaching to authority, which not even the wisest and justest of Governments can escape. A party in power attracts hostility, which, as things are, fastens upon the policies and personalities of that party and upon the interests supporting it. But we can be sure that if a specifically Christian party were in power a large measure of hostility would be accorded to the religion which it so boldly professed and criticized, by implication, its opponents for not possessing.

THE FACTOR OF INTEREST IN POLITICAL ALLEGIANCES

There is another point that needs making. In this country parties are founded on more than principle and policy and personalities. They are strongly based on interest, and C. P. Scott, writing with the detached malignancy of a Liberal, described the Conservative and Labour parties in these terms:

> The Conservative party is, and always has been, the party of interests, of powerful sections of the community whose interests might or might not coincide with the public advantage, but which had in either case to be protected. Property is its fetish, and where the interests, real or imaginary, of property are involved the dice are apt to be heavily loaded against the common good. And in a very real sense the same thing is true of Labour. The Labour party is based on the trade union, and the trade union, invaluable as are the services which it renders, and has rendered, is, after all, a sectional organization with sectional interests and, as at present organized, tends naturally and almost inevitably in the wars it carries on to forget that to every such war there is a third party—the public—which pays most of the costs.[1]

[1] Quoted from a leader of 1926 in *C. P. Scott* 1846–1932, published by Frederick Muller, page 209.

One does not need to be a Liberal, or even to accept all Scott's argument, to realize that there is at least some truth in what he said. Even if this small element of truth is denied, one must confess that it is what many think. Nor need interest be frowned on severely. The organization of interest, it might be held, is a proper political task ; out of the clash of interests the country's policy is formed on the whole to the greatest satisfaction of the greatest number. But this acceptable arrangement becomes much more doubtful if, as well as representing its interest groups, one party sets itself on claiming to represent the Christian community. Then indeed sectional selfishness has covered itself with something not its own and pretends altogether too much. One has seen this sort of thing happen on the Continent where the history of Christian parties has been bound up too often not with Christian democracy but with the most reactionary forces in the particular country. While such clerical associations might give a certain backing to a party, and so be relished by party organizers, they have in many instances done the utmost harm to the Church, the unnatural alliance costing it more than it ever gained from this organized temporal support.

THE SUPPLEMENT

Many readers have told us that among the Supplements which they value most highly are those which summarize and comment upon some important book which is either not available in this country or is of a length or difficulty to make heavy demands on the limited time which busy people can give to reading. The present Supplement may cause some News-Letter readers not already familiar with it to seek the reward which comes from tackling Martin Buber's earlier small book *I and Thou*. A few copies of an early News-Letter Supplement (No. 112) dealing with it are still available.

Kathleen Bliss

LIFE AS DIALOGUE

DEAR EDITOR,

In his book, *Between Man and Man*,[1] which has just been published, Martin Buber has, for the benefit of English readers, selected five of his works which appeared in Germany between the years 1929 and 1939, amplifying and applying the ideas contained in his now famous small volume, *I and Thou*.[2]

A WATERSHED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

This new book confirms the impression which I formed on reading the earlier one, when it was first published in German twenty-four years ago, that its insistence on *two* fundamental, wholly different, *uninterchangeable* forms of human experience, marked a watershed between a world that by surrendering itself too exclusively to one way of thinking has in it the sentence of death, and a new world that is struggling to the birth and has the secret of genuine renewal.[3] The realization of the crucial significance of relations between persons, and of the fundamentally *social* nature of reality is the necessary, saving corrective of the dominance of our age by the scientific way of thinking, the results of which, as we now know, may involve us in universal destruction, and by the technical mastery of things, which threatens man with the no less serious fate of dehumanisation.

One difficulty in understanding what Buber is saying is that what he is talking about is not something abstruse, but a perfectly familiar fact in the experience of ordinary men and women. What perplexes us at first is that he should attach to it such extraordinary importance. It is because he sees with penetrating clearness the danger of our being robbed of our human birthright that he is a prophet to our age. The real revolutionary may be the man who opens our eyes to a simple reality which stares us in the face, but to the decisive significance of which we

[1] Kegan Paul. 12s. 6d.
[2] T. & T. Clarke. 2s. 6d.
[3] Buber claims no monopoly in his central thesis. He traces its source to Feuerbach, and before the publication of *I and Thou* Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy had already begun to develop his very similar philosophy of *speech*.

have been unaccountably blind. Buber is not a thinker who finds enjoyment in pursuing one exciting idea after another. For him the perception of truth and a responsible attitude to it are inseparable. He has seen a truth on the acknowledgement of which the fate of mankind seems to him to depend and he has allowed it to become the master light of all his seeing, as his treatment of a variety of different subjects in this volume shows.

INDIVIDUALISM, COLLECTIVISM AND MAN WITH MAN

Unless man understands himself rightly he is bound to make a mess of things. Buber sees men to-day enslaved to false ways of thinking, which are driving them to their destruction.

In the effort to understand man one way is to take the individual as the starting-point. There is much that we can learn about man by such study. But it cannot disclose to us the ultimate truth about him, because what man really is can be learned only by seeing him in his total relation to his total environment.

Another way is to arrive at a view of the universe without taking special account of man and then try to fit him into the picture as one object among others. But that is not to answer, but to evade, the problem of man. It leaves out of account what is distinctive and unique in him—the amazing fact that out of the midst of the universe there has arisen something that faces the universe, a being that can ask questions about his relation to it and can experience the dread of knowing his homelessness and insecurity in it.

Again, we may, with Marx, leave on one side the deeper questions of human life and destiny and, taking society as our starting-point, offer men security in a perfected society. But it is increasingly evident that human society provides no final protection against the convulsions of the cosmos, and that collectivism offers no real deliverance of men from their isolation. It overpowers and numbs their sense of isolation rather than overcomes it. It destroys all the living bonds that make them persons. Real escape from their isolation can be found only in personal communion with other persons.

Neither the individual as such nor the aggregate as such, Buber insists, is the fundamental fact of human existence. The

fundamental reality is *man with man*. What is peculiarly characteristic of the human world is something that takes place between one being and another. The essence of human life is what *happens* between man and man. Man does not first exist as an individual and then enter into communication with others. It is in the communication that he is man. The understanding of this "between" is the great new task of thought to which our age is called.

What Buber asserts, is that human existence is essentially dialogue, demand and response, the eternal meeting of the one with the other; that "man can become whole not in virtue of a relation to himself but only in virtue of a relation to another self". But he does not for one moment intend to restrict that communication to man's relations with his fellow-men. Nothing could be more explicit than his statements on this point.

Man, he insists, has a *threefold* living relation, and his essential nature is fulfilled only if he lives with his whole self in all of these relations. He is related, first, to the world and to things, secondly, to his fellow-men and, thirdly, to the mystery of being, which the believer calls God. With all of these his true relation is communication.

A thinker with whom Buber plainly feels a deep kinship is Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard man's *sole* essential relation is his relation to God, to the exclusion of all other relations with objects or persons. In regard to this exclusion Buber parts company with Kierkegaard. For him relations with objects and human persons do not obstruct, but mediate, man's relation to God. But nothing could be further from Buber's thought than to conceive the universe in terms of man's littleness and finitude, or to imagine that man's stammering speech with his fellows can plumb the depths of the mystery of being.

To realize the importance of what Buber is saying we have only to recall that the great debate of our time—a debate in which wars are fought and men are prepared to die—is almost universally conceived as a conflict between individualism and collectivism. It is evidence of the prevailing confusion of thought that there can be prolonged discussions on the relation

of the individual to the community without any sign being given of an awareness that there are not two possibilities to be considered but *three*. The first step, as Buber rightly says, " must be to smash the false alternative with which the thought of our epoch is shot through—that of individualism or collectivism." To take that step would bring about a revolution in current thinking. The questions in debate would be posed in an entirely new way. We should find ourselves confronting a genuine *third* alternative. Society cannot dispense with institutions and impersonal forms of organization. But the truth that has power to emancipate our world from slavery to organization is that human life finds its fulfilment in free communion and interchange and mutual responsibility between man and man. This third alternative will not, like individualism and collectivism, delude and confuse us, because it is " a primal category of human reality ".

DIALOGUE

What then is this primal category to which Buber would recall us ? The essential thing in man is his capacity for being *addressed*. When we are really addressed, the answer has to be given not merely with our mind but with our whole self.

Everything that occurs to us addresses us. But for the most part we are too busy to listen. A man can go through life without ever hearing himself addressed or responding with his whole being to a word spoken to him by another. All of us protect ourselves against the disturbing effect of being addressed by turning another side of ourselves to the world. Knowledge says to us, " Be calm, nothing is directed at you ; it is just what is happening in the world, you can experience it as you like, whatever you make of it proceeds from you alone, nothing is requested of you."

The real meaning of life is disclosed to us only when we hear ourselves addressed. It may happen to anyone in an unexpected moment—it happens constantly to the man who is waiting and listening for it—that a demand is made on him, a demand not determined by himself, but coming to him unexpectedly and unforeseeably from without, to which he has to respond (or refuse to respond) with his entire being. It requires from him

not merely understanding or technical manipulation but vital decision. He must engage himself. Then and then only does he experience concrete reality. He immerses himself in the stream of life. In that exchange and response something new is born.

Buber is not talking about something remote, difficult and esoteric that only the few can understand. He is talking of the common stuff of everyday experience—something that happens, or may happen, in the life of every man.

Address and answer, demand and self-forgetting response, belong to the normal life of the family. All know them there. But can they be part of the texture of our organized, mechanized society? Buber says most emphatically yes, if we so choose. The leader of a great technical undertaking, for example, can live the life of dialogue, when he ceases to think of the enterprise merely in terms of the balance sheet, or as a structure of mechanical forces, and becomes aware of it as a human association; when, with a disciplined imagination, he keeps constantly before his mind the human beings engaged in the undertaking, so that, even though he cannot know all separately, if one of them happens to step into the circle of his vision he confronts him not as a number with a human mask but as a person; when he comprehends and handles these persons as persons, inevitably to a large extent indirectly by some system of mediation, but also directly when he meets them in personal encounter.

All of us know something from experience of the reality of response to another self and of responsible decision. Buber's great contribution is not merely that he has illuminated its meaning, but that he has perceived the immense danger that the essence of our humanity may be filched from us by the forces at work in modern society, and that to overcome this danger is the one over-riding task to which we must devote ourselves if we would be saved. In our age men are unmistakably more and more determined by circumstances. The might of social objectives is increasing. In proportion as we delude ourselves that nothing more is required of us than the technical mastery of every situation, we shall become the victims of sociological determination. Man will have abdicated his position in creation as a being responsible to God for exercising dominion over the

earth. He will have abandoned "his quest, his grasp, his indomitable will for the truth". Our most urgent need is to recover our humanity by "taking everything up into the might of dialogue of the genuine life, from the trivial mysteries of every day to the majesty of destructive destiny.[1] The task becomes more and more difficult, and more and more essential, the fulfilment more and more impeded and more and more rich in decision. All the regulated chaos of the age waits for the break-through, and wherever a man perceives and responds, he is working to that end."

RESPONSIBILITY

It is only in the life of dialogue that responsibility becomes real. The idea of responsibility has to be brought back into the sphere of the lived life. We must get rid of a fictitious responsibility—responsibility to oneself, to an idea, to something to which we cannot be made answerable. "Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding. Responding to what? To what happens to one." Responsibility presupposes some one who addresses me. "He addresses me about something that he has entrusted to me and that I am bound to take care of loyally. He addresses me from his trust, and I respond in my loyalty or refuse to respond in my disloyalty." Responsibility is to be answerable to a trusting person.

Every situation which demands from us a complete engagement is unique. It says something that has never been said before. It says it directly to me, and to no one else.[2] The response is an act of faith. No book of rules can tell me what I must do in this fateful hour. It is *my* hour for which I have to answer before God. "What has now approached me, the unforeseen, the unforeseeable, is a word from him. I give the word of my answer by accomplishing among the actions possible that which seems to my devoted insight to be the right one. With

[1] If justice is to be done to the full scope of Buber's thought, note must be taken of these pregnant words, reminding us of the wide range of experience in which we may find ourselves addressed.

[2] Responsibility can be borne by an essential *we*, as well as by an *I*, but to go into this is not necessary to make clear the main line of Buber's thought and would require more space than is available in this letter.

my choice and decision and action I answer the word, however inadequately, yet properly ; I answer for my hour."

The practical relevance of this understanding of personal responsibility becomes apparent when we ask what it means in political life. Political decision to-day is generally understood to mean joining a political party. But it is a disastrous mistake to suppose that when I have joined a party the time of deciding is over, and that the party relieves me of all political responsibility. For the man of faith, that is, for the man who knows the meaning of dialogue and responsibility, such an attitude is a fall from faith. To remove any area of life basically from the realm of responsible decision is to withdraw it from the rule of God over the world. That does not mean that the decisions of the party will not in many instances accord with my original choice, nor that, even when I differ from the party, I may not choose to give greater weight to its collective judgement than to my own. But it does mean that for the man who is resolved to obey God in all his acts, direction cannot be substituted for responsible decision. The collective " cannot enter instead of the person into the dialogue of the ages which the Godhead conducts with mankind ". It is precisely within the group, the party, the trade union, the employers' federation, that the battle for human freedom and responsibility has to be fought and won.

" We can detect among the young to-day," Buber says, " the beginnings of a realization that through absorption in the collective something important and irreplaceable has been lost to them. They are not yet fully awake to the fact that their blind devotion to the collective springs from the fear of being left, in this age of confusion, to rely on themselves, on a self that no longer receives its direction from the eternal values. But there is a dawning recognition that the man who no longer with his whole being decides what he does, or does not do, and assumes responsibility for it, becomes sterile in soul."

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION

In nothing is Buber more helpful than in his understanding and interpretation of the present religious situation.

He sees without illusion the desperate predicament of modern man. For him, as for other profound thinkers, the fundamental conflict of our age is between a world which for at least two thousand years has believed in a truth superior to man, and a world which has largely ceased to believe in it.

What is the believer, the preacher, the educator to do in such a situation ? It is senseless to try to go on talking about absolute norms to those for whom they have ceased to exist. To suppose that they can be convinced by argument is to assume that the denial is the result of reflection. What we have to deal with is a type of mind for which absolutes have no longer any meaning. " It is an idle undertaking to call out to a mankind that has grown blind to eternity : Look, the eternal values. To-day hosts upon hosts of men have everywhere sunk into the slavery of collectives, and each collective is the authority for its own slaves ; there is no longer, superior to the collectives, any universal sovereignty in idea, faith or spirit."

The reality and poignancy of the crisis are brought home to us by a vivid description of an incident (some years ago) in a school in Palestine. The question before the class was whether the ten commandments are binding in all circumstances or whether, for example, murder can become a good deed when committed in the interest of one's group. The pupil maintained that the life of a people, continuing through past and future generations, has an over-riding claim. The teacher suggested that what had enabled the past generations of the exile to live, and to outlive their trials, was that the " Thou shalt not " of the commandments never ceased to sound in their ears and hearts. The boy was silent for a while as though speech stifled him, and then burst out passionately, banging his fist on the newspaper containing the British White Paper, " And what have we achieved that way ? This ! Live ? Outlive ? Do you call that life ? We want to live ".

In this instance the conflict was acutely felt. Where all sense or understanding of an absolute has disappeared, there is only one way to proceed. It is to stand by the side of men where they are and to find a starting-point in their actual experience of life.

We have to find the point at which the individual becomes aware, however dimly, of something wanting in his life. The task of the teacher is to keep that pain awake, to show a way of escape from the frustration and to rekindle courage to shoulder the responsibilities of life.

The secret for the teacher, Buber believes, is to strive to gain an insight into the structure, and to hold before his pupils the image, of the great character. The great character is the man " who denies no answer to life and the world, but accepts responsibility for everything that he meets ". This sentence has, of course, to be understood in the light of Buber's insistence that responsibility is to a law or demand superior to oneself, not the fictitious responsibility of which Hitler boasted.

Trust in a human person, trust in the world because this human being exists, is the first step on the road to faith in God. Loyalty to a human person because of his trust in us is the first lesson in responsibility. It is " in a generation that has had this kind of upbringing that the desire will be kindled to behold again the eternal values, and to hear again the language of the eternal norm ".

To achieve this is a religious task. But it can be achieved only by a religion that is fully integrated with life, in a way that the life of the Church is not integrated at present with the life of society. I am convinced that it is by opening its mind, and conforming its practice, to the truth which Buber has perceived and so powerfully set forth that the Church can recover a fresh understanding of its own faith, and regain a real connection with the actual life of our time.

There was a time, Buber tells us, when religion was for him something separate from life, a concern of exalted hours. But now, " I possess nothing but the every day out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fulness but each mortal hour's fulness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response.

I do not know much more. If that is religion, then it is just *everything*, simply all that is lived in its possibility of dialogue."

Buber does not use specifically Christian language. But his essential thought is at once something which those who have been alienated from Christianity can understand in terms of their experience of life and a vessel into which the full, rich meaning of Christian faith can be poured.

The life of dialogue is no panacea for the cure of the evils from which the world is suffering. It offers no guarantee of certain escape from the threat of destruction that overhangs mankind. It provides no direct guidance for dealing with men's struggles for power, beyond telling us that that struggle is alien to man's real life. All that Buber says to us is: Live the life of dialogue in the bit of life that is yours, and you will have found the true meaning of life. Accept the responsibilities that life lays on you, and you will have done all that is required of you. But be ready also for the unexpected, unprecedented, surprising call that may at any time be addressed to you. All of us have a response to make not only to the immediate demands of every day, but, according to our capacity, to the total demand of our perplexing age. The statesman, handling great affairs, the thinker wrestling with profound problems of thought, may live the life of dialogue, and thereby better fulfil their tasks. In the dedication of the lived life of response you are reaching out your hands to God and finding him. All the rest you can, and must, leave to his care.

Yours very sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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